DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 556 PS 017 102

AUTHOR Villone-Betocchi, Giulia; Asprea, Anna Maria
TITLE Theoretical Approach to the Study of Cognitive Aspects in Children's Altruistic Behavior.
PUB DATE Jul 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (9th, Tokyo, Japan, July 12-16, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; Criteria; Foreign Countries; *Group Dynamics; *Justice; Moral Development; Moral Values; *Prosocial Behavior; *Value Judgment
IDENTIFIERS *Child Behavior; Italy; *Moral Behavior; *Moral Reasoning

ABSTRACT

A study was made of aspects of Italian children's moral behavior and moral reasoning in equity and non-equity situations. Subjects were male and female children of low socioeconomic status who were between the approximate ages of 8.5 and 10.5 years. Groups of four children were formed to include subjects of various sociometric status: one high, one average, and two low. All subjects participated in a drawing task for which they were praised individually, and rewarded as a group. Each subject was asked, individually, how he or she would distribute the reward to group members. Somewhat similar percentages of subjects decided to distribute rewards according to merit, oldest aged child, and youngest aged child. Subsequently, each group was reassembled and instructed to actually distribute the reward. Discussions of the children were recorded. Group dynamics influenced task performance: high status children played a major role in final decision making and perferred the equal distribution of reward. Finally, individual judgments were obtained from the subjects in an experimental situation designed to investigate children's knowledge of positive justice and their reactions to equity and inequity. A total of 83 percent of the children then asserted that the distribution of reward on the basis of merit fulfilled the equity criterion. Results are discussed. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF COGNITIVE ASPECTS IN CHILDREN's ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR

Giulia VILLONE-BETOCCHI Anna Maria ASPREA

Department of Relation and Communication Sciences

University of Naples

Via Porta di Massa ,1 - 80133 Napoli Italia Italy

ED290556

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Recent discussion on developmental psychology has called attention to children's positive social behavior, assumed as a cue for the understanding of cognitive deevelopment and of social processes.

The investigation of such positive behavior provides a better analysis of children's interaction nets, and of the dynamics among self-other differentiation, role-taking, perspective-taking and specific situational factors.

This paper aims to contribute, both theoretically and empirically, to the investigation of the origins of moral development, assuming that justice principles constitute the basis of positive social behavior, and of moral reasoning.

Previous research work in the field of positive social behavior (altruism, helping, sharing etc.) has called our attention to what, in our opinion, is the crucial point of any debate : the identification of the role that is played by the factors which interfere in the calling into action of the behavioral helping answer, in specific situations.

Such crucial point is even more salient in research which take into account helping behavior in children.

We will not review here the wide body of literature concerning perspective taking and altruism; successful/unsuccessful performance and

PS 017102

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A.M. Asprea
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

helping behavior; mood and altruism and so on. We will, rather, take into account the study of altruism development through the analysis of moral development, assuming that evaluations in terms of justice knowledge , justice principles of equity ,merit, need and compromise are the premises of altruism development, and that they require fresh thinking. As Damon (1977) has clearly pointed out, children's knowledge of sharing and fair distribution of goods is childhood's closest representative of moral functioning . Damon's assumption has been that a child originally constructs his moral knowledge through direct dealing with justice itself, usually in the form of everyday problem in "positive justice".

On the other hand, Kohlberg (1973) has maintened that children and adults organize their entire social world through one or more of the basic "justice structure" that make up his six stages of moral judgement thinking. To quote Damon (1977/170) again, justice in Kohlberg's view is the essential factor in human social life; and human thinking about social relation and institution is structured primarily by notion of justice.

In the past decades, research on moral development has gone through different phases, characterized by proven methodology and dominant theories. While Freud,Piaget and Kohlberg have exclusively used the method of observation and interview, much of the initial empiric work has used, as measures of moral development, written tests. The most well known of these techniques dates from 1928 and the problem which then had to be solved was the confirmation of the consistency level of moral behavior as determined by the examination of different situations. This problem being related to the specific or universal nature of such behavior. In other words, it was necessary to know if a child, behaving

in a certain way at a moral and ethic level in a given situation, could repeat that same behavior in a different situation. Hartshorne and his colleagues (1928) spent five years examining students' behavior at a secondary school, in the class, on the sport ground, at parties, in church and scout's activities. The students were put in different situations, all designed to tempt them to behave in an immoral way. For example, the students were asked to evluate their true-false tests without the teacher's supervision. Naturally they ignored the fact that the researchers had a copy of their work and that they could check any possible changes made during the correction. Taking into consideration the different tasks which encouraged the students to lie, cheat and steal, Hartshorne and his colleagues, found no correlation between them. Consequently, moral or immoral behavior of each subject only depends on the characteristics of the situation. For example, the student who wanted to cheat on the evaluation of his test would not necessarily be the one who wanted to steal money from the teacher's drawer. Once the results of this projects were published, psychologists' reaction, strangely, was to relegate research regarding moral development. They considered such research futile and deduced that any study designed to identify an organised system of moral development would be useless. But there were some exceptions; infact, Burton (1963) reconsidered the results of Hartshorne's research, and managed to find a certain consistency in the answers obtained from the subjects in different situations. The level of this consistency was not particularly high but, nevertheless, it allowed the researchers to reconsider the problem.

The situational specificity of the moral behavior is moreover doubtful for Allport (1968), who pointed out how a kind of coherence can be found even when the student is cheating in the test evaluation, but does not steal money from the teacher's drawer. Infact, in both situations, the student's

behavior can be understood as to achieve the teacher's approval. As it is well known in psychology, the apparent inconsistency of some behaviors can, instead, be maintened by a deep coherence of motivations. It sounds clear from what it has been said, that the central point of the theorising is related to the eventuality of a unit process of moral development.

The cognitive and the psychoanalytic approaches are in agreement by hypothesyzing such a universality, and by considering that cognitive individual behavior should always be the same in all situations. The cognitive social learning approach maintened the traditional poisition of specificity. Mischel and Mischel (1976) suggested that to determine a moral behavior, or an immoral one, is not so much a general tendency, as the individual ability to discriminate between two situations and to anticipate their different consequences. Sears and his colleagues (1965) and Nelson et alii (1969), carried out new research in more controlled conditions, on younger children.

As for Kohlberg, it goes to say that, beyond ulterior observations that can be made through application of his method of experiment, it appears to be quite remarkable the correlation between the scores obtained by different dilemmas. This testifies in favour of the existence of a certain level of generality in the moral development, apart from the diversity of the situations. In moral behavior, it is involved the individual personality with all possible motivations, experiences and representations. Even to feel guilty or to be able to resist temptations, are all complex elements that cannot be assumed as indipendent variables. Guilt cannot stop a certain behavior , either because it is not sufficiently strong to balance the advantages that behavior provides, or because it is not totally foreseen before performing a certain action.

In the period between '46 and '56, Gesell and his colleagues described the child's development from five to sixteen years old, pointing out

a spiral model of moral development, and identifying in the first five years of life the moral developmental foundation. Two are the developmental stages: one from five to ten, the other from ten to sixteen; such a development has a sequence character, which confirms Piaget's theory. Moreover, Gesell confirms the tendency of such a development from specificity to generality, and from the concrete datum to the abstract one. We cannot say , though, that research done in this period of time has confirmed Piaget's conclusions; some have criticized the theory of the two morals and the main critic is stated by Kohlberg.

Kohlberg's theory , and his methodological model, has been successful in the '70s, giving out a great number of research; in our opinion the most important one concerns the invariance of stage sequency, the function of cognitive conflict and the function of role-taking. In Kohlberg's theory, the possibility of foreseing a direct relationship between behavior and moral reasoning is not apparent. On the other hand, if different behaviors can imply the same motivation, still, at least at a general hypothesis level, there should be a relationship between reasoning and behaviors. We believe that Langer's (1969) suggestion may contribute to the solution of the problem: according to this Author, the discrepancy between levels of moral reasoning and behaviors creates a source of disequilibrium and, in order to obtain the reduction of this, it is necessary to reduce the discrepancy by bringing behavior and reasoning closer.

In the case of moral reasoning and of moral behavior, the experimental research offer useful elements for the confirmation of a certain level of agreement between them. Yet the problem is not solved: from the way an individual thinks it is not possible to foresee with certainty the way he is going to act.

The necessary condition for moral development in infancy and adolescence, according to Kohlberg, is mainly cognitive and symbolic, and it does not imply specific personal experience. Nevertheless, the cognitive term does not exclude emotional contents: infact, moral structures of judgement can be saturated by emotional contents, obviously tied by social interaction, and can constitute the determinants of behavioural choice. That is to say that the emotion has the function of a fuse that makes the process throughout explode.

Further, the research in the theoretical frame of reference of equity theory, and the reconsideration of cooperation and helping in children, have highlighted a substantial matter: the conflict between selfishness and altruism. Such a conflict, infact, rather than being related to the opposite dynamics of selfishness and altruism, it should be referred to the conflict between two important processes: the perception of one's own deservedness and the worry about keeping justice in respect of others. Moreover, these studies are intended to emphasize the validity of a development model that associates the involvement related to the perception of merit, with the ability of dominating the impulses postponing gratification and pleasure. Those children who are placed at a developmental level in which they are able to postpone the satisfaction of a need, are considered to have a major sensitivity, and a major understanding of personal merit and of justice in respect of others. Such characteristics involve perspective taking (perceptual, social, empathic, moral) as, to quote Underwood and Moore (1982), primary mediator of the development of altruism.

In this particular field of researching and theorizing we have carried out a study with the aim of anlysing some particular aspects both of moral behavior and of moral reasoning in equity and in non-equity situation.

Sample and procedures

Our procedure consisted of a laboratory study and of a picture interview. Subjects were children of both sexes recruited from an elementary school, aged 8.4 /10.6, [illegible] of low socioeconomic status.

A short sociometric test was devised in order to form small groups of four children, with the following composition: one child randomly chosen among those who received a higher number of sociometric choices ; one child randomly chosen among those who had an average number of sociometric choices; two children randomly chosen among those who received few or no sociometric choices.

The sociometric dimension has been introduced in order to evaluate the influence of the "attraction"component of equity behavior and moral reasoning.

All children were under a condition of "successful performance" , that is: a drawing task for which they were all praised individually, and rewarded as a group, with 10 candies. The researcher, after the task had been accomplished, asked each child, separately, how he would distribute the ten candies reward in his group, taking into account different "deservedness" conditions, such as . merit, age, or others ' This first stage of individual moral reasoning, as well as both the following stages, were duly recorded.

The 39% of the children quoted the "merit"criterion. While the 28% give evidence of an "age-attraction" criterion choosing the "oldest , because he/she is more nice".

The 22% of children maintain still an age-criterion, but in the direction of the younger level of age ("the youngest boy"). To choose the youngest component of the group for reward-giving seems an"easy way" of moral reasoning for getting out from a conflictual choice such as: "merit" vs. other criteria .

In the second part of the study, each group was brought together again and instructions were given in order to actually distribute the ten candies reward. The most interesting datum concerns, in this part of the study, the group-dynamics, given the particular sociometric position of each child. In some groups, the "leader" (in other words the "most liked child") has influenced the final decision. Whenever the conflicts were higher, the solution was always forwarded by the most attractive child, and such solution was readily accepted by the other components of the group. In four groups the solution, as expressed by a child who ment to benefit the leader, was promptly accepted by the other children.

All this may account for the variety of answers which appear to be more connected with affective dynamics than with cognitive criteria. It may be hypothesized that the interaction of the "preferred" children hampered the rational solution of the reward-distribution task, stressing the need for fullfilling affective states.

Further analysis of the discussion contents, gave evidence of another interesting datum: the children with higher sociometric rates showed a preference for the equal distribution of reward, probably owing to their need of avoiding "frustration and aggression" consequences in the group, in order to maintain their own role of preferred children and not to jeopardize their pleasant feelings.

It is of some interest to emphasize that if a child with an average sociometric score, forwarded a solution in favor of the leader, the latter refused it and the other two children accepted the conciliating proposals he made. In general it may be noted that the preferred children give evidence of different ways of moral reasoning in the two different experimental conditions. In the condition in which social interaction factors

play a more important role, such as in the group-situation, the children seem to have a better capability of social and moral perspective taking.

In the third part of the study, the children were again requested of an individual judgement, this time in a hypothetical experimental condition. In order to investigate children's knowledge of positive justice, together with their reactions to equity or inequity, we had elaborated three cards, schematically drawn, with three hypothetical situations. Each child was confronted with the hypothesized situation of a group different from his own, in which a child was rewarded on basis of his matching with each of the three possible situations : reward to the child who"made the most"; reward to the child who "is the youngest one " . Each submitted situation could be defined by each child as an equity or inequity condition. In both cases the child would be asked about the reasons of his/her answers.

The 83% of children believe that the reward-distribution on the basis of merit (reward to the child who made the most) fulfills the equity criterion. The reward to the oldest child is generally (80%) considered as a non equity choice . By contrast, the 69% of children believe that the reward to the youngest child is to be considered as a choice of equity. In this particular situation the reasoning criterion might be explained in terms of cultural background (child rearing practices) according to which more attention has to be devoted to a younger child. Such choice, though, requires to be considered too in the perspective of a "help-giving" way of reasoning.

Following the consideration stemming from the above mentioned study, we plan to bring together, at an empirical level, two theoretical contexts of research: equity and prosocial development, with the aim of getting a better understanding of children's motivation for helping, children's perception of the

consequences of helping and children's moral reasoning in different hypothetical helping situations. In fact, in such situations, we may assume that helping might be reported by the children to equity and non-equity conditions, according to their moral reasoning . In other words, the children not only might tend to help more, with growing age ,as well known in literature, but they would also tend to help more when the helping situation can be defined in terms of equity-request for help.

Bibliography

Allport G.W., (1968). Values and our youth. Boston: Beacon Press.

Burton R.V.,(1963).'The generality of honesty reconsidered.' Psychological Review ,70 (3), 223-237.

Gesell A., Ilg F.L., (1946). The child from five to ten. New York: Harper.

Gesell A., Ilg F.L., Ames L.B.(1956). Youth: the years from ten to sixteen . New York: Harper.

Hartshorne H., May M.S.,(1928-1930). Studies in the nature of character, Vol.I : Studies in deceit, Vol.II: Studies in self-control. Vol. III: Studies in the organization of character. New York: McMillan.

Langer J., (1969). 'Disequilibrium as a source of development' in P.H.Mussen, J.Langer, M.Covington (eds.), Trends and issues in developmental psychology. New York:

Mischel W., Mischel H.N.,(1976). 'A cognitive-social learning approach to morality and self regulation.' in T. Lickona (ed.), Moral development and behavior. New York: Holt.

Nelson E.A., Grinder R.E.,Mutterer M.L.,(1969).'Source of Variance in Methodological Analyses' Developmental Psychology,1, 69-75.

Sears R.R., Rau L., Alpert R., (1965). Identification and child rearing . Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Underwood B., Moore B., (1982). 'Perspective-Taking and Altruism.' Psychological Bullettin, 91 (1): 143-173.